OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

THUMBS UP

By HERBERT D. WARD

GREAT splotches of blue flecked the east of the stadium. Like patches of living blood, solid masses of crimson on the west seemed ready to blur or to blot the few modest corn-flowers that had strayed there. The massive stadium was a hanging garden of human color. The surmounting curves of colonnades gave the only touch of impersonal dignity in the reverberating excitement that preceded the historic struggle. These columns of Doric effect seemed to the imaginative eye emblematic of that innate and eternal lust for violence which in the Cæsarian age was heralded by bloody proclamations, and in ours is concealed under the mask of sport.

On the side of the Blue a couple sat in the cheering section. Above and below them the frantic mob of undergraduates howled in drilled unison to megaphonic leadership. When the band played "Boola Boola," and the stirring refrain was taken up by ten thousand throats, it seemed as if the volume of sound would irresistibly blast the crimson wall opposite.

Mrs. Alexander Penwith sat erect. Her face was flushed as a girl's. Her eyes were fixed, almost cataleptic. Her features were rigid. She was in the grip of a martial emotion which she felt she must control or die. At the age of forty-seven, she had the figure of an amazon and the hard flesh of a professional athlete.

This army girl, born in the Civil War, the daughter of a general, had been reared in camps, had been brought up on horses, and had made a god of exercise. In a moment of passion she had married a sober civilian. The tempest of feeling had been replaced by the serenity of an abiding love. Alexander Penwith was no military hero, but he was no less a conqueror by reason of his tireless tenderness and unerring intuition. To his placidity the volcano gradually yielded. And when Alexander junior went to college there was only now and then an outburst of white steam.

It was in their only child, that son of hers, that Mrs. Penwith was living over again the almost forgotten military days of her childhood, just as in that son of his the father was trying to recast his own college life of thirty-five years ago.

In the blackness of the night, when he was awakened by the clangor of the fire-bells, Alexander Penwith would wonder at the alien and heroic qualities of his own son. Whence that torso? That fleshless weight? Those cable muscles? That undaunted determination? That impersonal ferocity? That canine litheness? That untainted discipline? That phenomenal popularity? "The best all-around man in college," was the popular cry. It was an honor to be the boy's father.

All at once the antiphonic cheering was amalgamated into a hoarse roar. Forty thousand spectators arose as one person to their feet to greet the athletes as they loped into the arena. What giants! How light of step! How fleet of foot! How grim of jaw! Neither King Arthur nor William the Conqueror had such knights as these. No armor of the olden days was forged to fit such towering forms, those monstrous chests. Whether it be jousting or football, each century the form of man grows nobler. We have gained six inches in stature in the last four hundred years.

Each heart, like each college, has its hero. In the few minutes' practice that preceded the referee's whistle there was no doubt about the worship that educated brawn commands. In the ears of Captain Morgan, of the Blue, his name, repeated three times like three snaps of a whip at the end of a long cheer, was like the starting pistol to a mettlesome trotter. But this peer of all kickers, this plunger feared by all opponents, only tightened his lips into a grim smile. He stood for manly, clean football, with no foul tackles, no *sotto voce* insults, no *sub rosa* spiking, no dark "smearing." Not a whit behind him in defensive tackling and offensive plunging, in brilliant and quick-witted courage, was Captain Cabot of Harvard, the giant and smiling tackle of the Crimson squad. Opposed to each other in sped and power were the two half-backs—Bates of the one, and Penwith of the other college. But no one doubted who was the better man. As a supplement to Morgan, Penwith was the trainer's ideal. The eyes of his university, of the whole football world were upon him. His opponents feared him more than any other man.

Penwith had a burst of speed combined with a dodging instinct phenomenal in so heavy a man. Moreover, he was a certain catcher. In a whole season of kicking he only muffed one punt. But beyond and above all else, that which would have distinguished a sure varsity player, he had the rarer quality and power of being able to tackle and bring down a man of any weight and speed. Nor did he ever fail in any game to make at least one run that transferred the play near his opponent's goal, and so give his own team a chance to score. He was dangerous, cool, couchant, irresistible; he was the acknowledged star of the first magnitude in the football firmament of his senior year. He was a sure candidate for Walter Camp's final All-America football eleven.

"Penwith! Penwith!! *Penwith!!!*" Why, the name in itself carried with it a victorious swing that insured a certain triumph. He was three men grouped into one. He was no half-back made to order by patient coaches. He was created to fill that position. That is what football men said.

But his mother knew. She thought she was all woman, yet she ought to have been born a man, as her son was. He represented her militant soul in the most strenuous of athletic achievements. In her veins coursed valor which in her son was transmuted into intrepidity. Her natrue was that of command; his of courageous obedience. Both are military virtues of the highest quality. Neither could spell the word "fear." She gloried in his nerve, and he rejoiced in her comprehension of his athletic prowess. Her natural audacity had in him through years of training been transformed into a disciplined daring that was terrifying. He tackled like a raider, dodged like a guerilla. He was the Mosby of the gridiron.

Yes, she knew, the daughter of a hundred battles, the mother of a bloodless hero. She gloried in his defiance of danger, in his disciplined savagery. So far he had escaped accident, or, rather, as she argued, "incident." For what was a strained tendon, what was water on the knee, or what a broken collar-bone, but appurtenances of the game as necessary as the shoulder-pads or the cleats—or, as for that matter, the signals of the quarter? She was born to the scent of blood. It did not nauseate her. Danger maddened her. That was the man of the woman of her. Were it not for the quiet husband at her side, the governor of her nature, she would arise and cry, "Kill!" Now her veins boiled. Pretty soon she would think, "Kill!" No Roman citizen had a ferocity more primitive than hers while the combat waged. No tigress would have clawed more fiercely for victory than she.

Yet her unbridled militant instinct, her madness for the stigmata of combat, had fair play as a common denominator. "Buck the line hard; give no quarter; play fair," was the motto that this woman had engraved upon the soul of her son. She was satisfied. No "mollycoddle" was born unto her name. For in her boy were combined the energy of a cave-dweller, the chivalry of a medieval knight, and the courtesy of a twentieth-century gentleman. His primitive impetuosity was under the guardianship of rigid teamwork. This made him none the less honorably and legally dangerous.

There are many ways of putting a man out of play besides the violence of the rush. These neither the judge nor the referee will see without punishment. To knee a man foully when he is down, to gouge him in the eye when no official is looking, to whisper disconcerting abuse, maliciously to overwhelm him in a scrimmage—these are only a few of the possible outrages of close play. Open the game—use more kicking, separate the players—and you diminish the chances of preconcerted brutality.

But Penwith's massive rushes, his zigzag dodges, had the habit of bringing disaster in their wake. At Princeton a man had his shoulder-blade broken by trying to stop Penwith. At another time while warding off a tackler with his iron arm, in one of his ferocious plunges, he had shattered an opponent's jaw. In circling the end of a gain he had recently collided with a solar plexus. He was nearly broken-hearted over these accidents—legitimate mishaps of a strenuous game. No one could possibly accuse him of intentional brutality. He was too gentle of heart. But his tenderness of nature did not diminish by a quarter of a pound the impact of his terrible momentum.

Penwith had come to be so feared by his opponents on the football field that in spite of his intercollegiate popularity teams had gone out of their way to "do him up." These attempts had all resulted disastrously to everybody concerned but Penwith. He divined and grinned. Those who were not seen and penalized were hurled one side with a calm energy that was maddening because of its irresistible impersonality. "It's no use"—the words went from university to college—"you can't hurt Penwith. He's hard as rocks, and recovers like elastic."

It was the last great game of the year. For these forty thousand spectators, for this titanic contest, all else had been but preparation. The coaching, the iron discipline, the new team-plays—the on-side kick, the forward pass, the new combinations, which if any one should work it would mean ten, thirty yards, or possibly the glory of a goal—the preliminary collegiate games, the evolution of eleven personalities into one. These were only the novitiate to the final duel in the stadium that is always historic. There physical reputations are made and shattered for life. Among the twenty-two gladiators none were better groomed, better prepared, or more confident than Penwith. If any one could leap the Blue into victory it was he.

Suddenly the discordant blares of intersecting bands, the antiphonic shrieks of men, stopped. The two captains strode with the officials into the center of the field. The toss of the coin would decide the choice of the goal to attack. With the dazzle of the sun there blew a gentle, westerly wind—not too fierce to determine the final result for evenly fatched teams, but just teasing enough to make the sure catch of a high punt a matter of fine calculation. To play the first half into the eyes of both the sun and wind may take precisely that immeasurable quantity of energy and pluck which should be given to football and not to position. It may be enough to tip the scale. No wonder necks craned, and there came from the throats of the Crimson a dull groan apostrophizing the "usual Blue luck."

With backs toward the sun, the visiting team took its position.

Mr. Alexander Penwith intently noticed the exceeding care with which the Crimson kicker prepared the little mound of earth from which the ball was to be played. To him, as well as to the thousands who hardly dared to breathe, it seemed as if it took hours instead of seconds to place the oval in exact position. Like salmon that in their maturity intuitively from a thousand outlets find the river of their birth, so Penwith's mind went back to his old college days of thirty-five years ago.

Traditions of those hardy years had almost passed away. Then the college was more important than the university. There were no "smokers" in those days. Then boys elected college because of their family traditions and the excellence of the instruction, not for social or athletic reasons. In those good old times football was fun, not science. You kicked the ball with glee. You ran with élan. Penwith ought to know. Those were the transitional days when the game was a travesty on Rugby and when there was no hero. He played then, and enjoyed the freedom of the sport in his silent way. It was then no close and aristocratic corporation.

Mr. Penwith never talked about his obsolete athletic prowess. Compared with the game about to be enacted before him, it wasn't prowess. It required neither courage nor dexterity, merely the desire to play. Now the game had grown like the college. It was elaborate, a strain to every nerve, strenuous and hazardous.

It did not take a very keen observer to notice that the game had passed into one of intricate and extreme danger. Already thirty deaths and over two hundred accidents had occurred upon the gridiron that season. This is an inexcusable penalty for a game. It is unnecessary payment for a sport. So Alexander Penwith thought, and he was no weakling and no coward. He had only the rare habit of estimating values. Had he not been an extraordinary business man he would have made an ideal judge.

He was a man of plans. Hitherto he had been his own prophet, and hoped to be the seer for his son. While the boy and the mother were athletically one, the lad and his father had not been at armed neutrality, as one might suppose. They talked little together, for Mrs. Penwith monopolized home coversation. But the boy had silently measured the power behind his father's taciturnity, and had, with a comprehending droop of the eyelids, tasted wisdom as it came in homeopathic doses.

As it so often happens with women of masterful intensity, while Mrs. Penwith had correctly estimated her husband's character, she had but scant knowledge of his power. Brought up in the old school where explosion accompanied irruption, she had little comprehension of silent force. But the men with whom Mr. Penwith associated knew and respected the energy that made him their peer or their superior. He put all the qualities into business that his boy put into football, and then added potent virtues of which the lad had never dreamed. In the world of trade he was as resistless as his junior was upon the gridiron. He had forged out of nothing a house whose name was vigorous from the Atlantic to the Pacific. He was a very rich man, although few suspected the extent of his holdings. He was so simple and unostentatious, so sincere and sympathetic, that his unusual wealth was not even imagined by his wife. She looked upon him patronizingly as a man of only a little more than average trade success. Mental weight and physical force seldom comprehend each other.

But Alexander Penwith felt that in spite of his son's lustihood the boy did understand him. For that reason the senior dreamed dreams. He saw his son beginning at the bottom and reaching heights that he himself never could attain. To Mr. Penwith track athletics, baseball, football were only a means to a dominant end. It would need an invincible physique to carry the boy past "Americanitis" to the goal of his father's ambition.

And because of his dreams, because of his ambitions, because of his plans, Alexander Penwith feared for his only son every time the half-back strode upon the football field. It takes but very little to disturb the balance of nature. Penwith had ploughed a large field for his son's future. And while his wife, lance-eyed, watched the chosen man place the ball for the first kick-off, the father trembled.

The referee's whistle blew stridently. This sharp signal announcing the beginning of the great game smote the forty thousand into silence. Instinctively every spectator crouched for the kick-off.

The kicker stepped back from the unconscious ball, and for the quiver of an eyelash deliberated. Would he dribble the ball, holding it from a bound in his own line, and depend on the prowess of advancing rushes? Or would he kick it with his might, landing it as near the enemy's goal as possible? Was the play to be offensive or defensive? His first move would prove the key to the Crimson's strategy. The intake of a great breath was heard. It sounded like a gigantic sigh. The kicker walked deliberately toward the ball, and then increased his gait to a canter. The spectators elongated. They stretched eager necks. Many cried "Ah!" for it was a mighty boot.

High toward the Blue goal the ball whirled. Then, caught by the wind, it halted suddenly in the air and came down perpendicularly. But that stop in mid-air gave the bounding Crimson tacklers time.

Penwith came suddenly to a halt—a look of bewilderment and then of terror swept his face.

Then the cheering section of the visiting university uttered a great cry.

"Penwith! Penwith!! *Penwith!!!*" Punctuating the roar, and splitting it, one distinctly heard the clashing of bodies cuirassed in leather. For, even as Penwith caught the ball on the run, he was overwhelmed by human missiles who leaped upon him as if shot from a mortar. Where had been the boasted interference that should have protected the catcher? Swept like dandelion fluff in a gale by the irresistible onslaught. Every man jumped to his feet. The uproar on the Blue side suddenly gave way to a death-like silence, while the expectant muteness of the Crimson "rooters" opposite broke into a fanfare of clangor. The hero of a thousand scrimmages was downed in his tracks before he had advanced an inch. The shrill whistle of the referee announced the miraculous fact that this play was at an end. Crimson men began piling off of the discomfited idol.

A groan went up from the Blue side. This sound of agony stilled the exultation of the Crimson cheers. For when the tacklers had clambered to their feet it was noticed that a man, clad in blue and buff, of a mighty figure, yet looking strangely shrunken, lay extended upon his own fifteen-yard line.

"Penwith!" shot the terrified whisper from board to board. Alexander Penwith forced his wife to her seat. The two were hemmed in by a solid wall of standing boys. They alone could not see.

"My God!" cried a voice from below. "Only thirty seconds of play!"

The emergency surgeon rushed to the boy's side. A colored man hurried with a pail of water. Captain Morgan sat down and took the limp head into his lap. He sobbed like a child. But Penwith did not move.

For three minutes—for three centuries—the injured man lay lifeless. The spectators stared. It was for this they had come—for the possibility of accident, for the lust of horror, that their own souls would not acknowledge. And when the horror came they repudiated their innate savagery, and trembled at the tragedy.

Surrounded by a stricken ring of comrades the half-back lay. The surgeon had made a skilful examination. There were no bones broken. The boy's neck was intact. "It is only temporary," the surgeon explained, and looked impersonally cheerful. The gladiator's head was dripping with water, but his skin was yet chalk and his eyes shut. The expression of the face was so aloof from the game that the lips of the watchers quivered apprehensively. Yes—the heart was still beating; but when—?

The eyes of the stricken boy fluttered and then looked around vaguely. The surgeon redoubled his ministrations. A faint color made hectic the player's cheeks and a purple inundated his lips. He made a motion as if to rise, but was held authoritatively back by his captain. A cup was put to his lips. These slowly changed to a dull pink.

Then Penwith shuddered. "Where am I?" he cried. "Let me up!" Captain Morgan appealed to the surgeon by a look. The doctor nodded. The referee, twiddling his whistle nervously, perplexed, watched Penwith. Assisted by two men, Penwith swayed to his feet. He looked around as if seeking for recognitions. His eyes were huge of pupil and glassy of stare.

Seeing their hero upon his feet, the leaders of both the rival cheering sections waved their megaphones madly. They howled: "Now three times three for Penwith!" But Captain Morgan, with one arm supporting his dearest friend, raised the other toward his breathless college mates. The cheering leaders seemed to have profaned a solemnity by their call for applause. The silence became surcharged. The eyes of a thousand of his own men were centered upon a staggering figure.

With a mighty wrench Penwith broke suddenly from his captain's arm and started forward. Something in their hero's attitude arrested anew the cheering section of his college and caused every heart to surge to the mouth. Only one seated couple did not see the tragic pantomime. For, in the impetuosity of his solitary rush, Penwith came suddenly to a halt; a look of bewilderment and then of terror swept his face. Awed by the strange action, his own men dared not touch him. Then the half-back turned from the field to his side of the stadium festooned in blue. He put his hands to his eyes like a sailor peering at far-off smoke. Then the boy stretched out both arms—and walked, faltering, groping, staring, terribly staring. Another groan arose like a great chorus from the boys who loved him. Captain Morgan grasped the swaying figure. It had turned and was groping again. The groan became a sob.

"What's that? What's that?" whispered Mrs. Penwith. For answer her husband dug his fingers into her hard arm.

"Let me go!" A thrilling voice penetrated the vast audience. "I'm all right. Confound it! Let me at them. Where are they? Don't put me out!" The figure fought with strong arms against the encasing tenderness of his mates.

Forty thousand people quaked in their hearts. What had they gone forth to see. This? Women were beginning to become hysterical. Strong men gulped. But the Blue men choked and knew.

"I won't!" cried the agonized voice, in a higher pitch. "Let me alone— Why—*I can't see!*"

Struggling, fighting with all the force of a hundred football engagements, the blind half-back, protesting and sobbing, was borne from the field. He was bound in the arms of those who when they are not as fierce as gorillas can be as tender as maternity.

When the referee's strident whistle announced the beginning of the next play Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Penwith were not to be seen.

The Penwith house had been hushed for six weeks. In a darkened room, upon his own bed, the lad lay. He knew the worst. He had read it in his mother's change. Her arms were soft and yielding. The amazon had become tender, womanly, tactful. He knew it from his father. He divined the graven wrinkles, the new white hair. He felt it in the long, strong masculine grip that said everything and needed no word of explanation.

The boy did not know the reason of it, but he knew his condition. Absolute blindness! The surgeon had explained the accident to the parents with great learning. The player had been hit upon the optic commissure, the sensitive nerve in the occipital region that connects the two optic thalami. There was nothing to do but rest in bed and wait. It was only a question whether the injury were too serious for absorption. If so, the boy was blind for life. There was no skill on earth that could save him, only his own clean past.

Nothing was allowed to excite the lad—no stories of football, no reports of the solicitude of his college mates.

But every night when his father came home there were deeper canons on the man's face, more silver on his head, a grimmer, tenser carrying of the jaws. He would take two stairs at a time in soft bounds, glide into the dim room, seat himself on the bed, grasp the lad's hand in his own and ask:

"How's my boy to-night?" That was all. Then the two would be silent for a long time. There was nothing to say. But what thoughts were theirs?

To the man so rapidly aging, looking down upon the uncertain outline of his only child, what shattered dreams! What systems of work never to be done! It was monstrous that he had built in vain. It was inconceivable that a game could culminate in so black a tragedy.

And what thoughts were the boy's during these long sable weeks?—weeks whose darkness might not brighten with the years, or forever. Did he curse the fate that robbed him of that last great honor, that would have been surely his, and for which he had so faithfully trained? Did he wonder if the loss of him cost his team the victory? Did he regret his shattered college career and his forfeited diploma? Did he think of the waste of his manhood? Did he contemplate a blind life? Did he forecast what it would mean? The irony, the humiliation of it? No one knew. The boy lay silent and grim. His father's grip was his only daily event.

Mrs. Penwith had a boisterous nature, not given to intuition or the refined evidences of delicacy. The distance between horseback and the sick-room, the country club and blindness, had been stumbled over with an accession of humility that her husband noticed without comment. But did the lady, now for the first time beginning to question the value of the military ideal, divine her son's attitude toward her? Could he have analyzed it himself? When his keen ears anticipated her entrance into the room, he turned his head to the wall, as if too tired to speak or to be spoken to. A nice observer or a disciple of psychotherapy might have argued that the boy was pursuing a train of thought which he did not wish interrupted by unsympathetic influence. However that may be, this phenomenon did not happen when his father came.

But both mother and father recognized the mighty struggle that the lad made for life. Sudden blindness to a Hercules is not life; it is assassination. Young Penwith obeyed orders eagerly and without murmur. His sunny disposition never clouded. His courage never waned. It seemed as if his years of preparatory and collegiate training in athletic subordination had been only for this test of submissiveness. Told to relax, he did so. Ordered to sleep, he slept. Commanded to vegetate, he became in his mind a cabbage. He played that he was one of a row of them. Prescribed to drop athletics from his mind, he promptly forgot even the signals and plays of football. Required to eliminate the thought of study, he put the memory of his special courses from his brain. When he found himself unduly thinking, or obsessed with the restlessness of inactivity, he resolutely commandeered sleep. It was imposed upon him not to think eyes. What an order to a young god smitten blind! Yet, with a resolution that was almost superhuman, he substituted the thought of toes. Blessed and harmless substitution!

And yet! When he felt his father's hand, there was electrified in him the whole value of the tragic horror. For his father had not been forbidden to think. Then, against the boy's will, his blood raced; and he was glad of it—and then he was ashamed because he had broken orders.

It is a curious fact that the culmination of a tragedy is often witnessed by those whom the principals might not choose.

It was about two in the afternoon, just following a light lunch, that young Penwith turned and looked straight at his mother standing by his bed. To one accustomed to the dim light, objects are easily distinguished. So unusual was this attitude of the boy's that Mrs. Penwith stood rooted. She hardly dared breathe. It seemed to her disorded mind that her son was inspecting her. Her tall bosom rose and fell. What did he think he saw? What was he about to say? What additional horror was to be hers? For she knew that a crisis was at hand.

"Mother," the voice came naturally and evenly. "You have grown awfully thin. It's too bad."

Too startled to realize what this meant, Mrs. Penwith dropped upon the foot of the bed; and then the two stared at each other.

"How do you know?" she asked, hoarsely.

"It's perfectly plain."

"How many fingers am I holding up?" She raised her hand above her head.

"Two," without hesitation, the answer came.

Then Mrs. Penwith knew. She did not cry. She did not embrace. She was a soldier's daughter, and it occurred to her that this was exactly the time for self-restraint.

"You mustn't talk," she said, very quietly. "I want to telephone to the office. He—" she stopped, gripped with the emotion she was to evoke.

"Do you want to know first," she whispered, leaning toward her boy, "how the game came out?"

The lad turned his head wearily to the wall.

"I don't care," he said, distinctly. "I want my father."

But that night evening editions flamed the news wherever the search-light of the press shot: "Penwith sees! *Penwith sees!*"